

THE GREAT DICTIONARY QUEST

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Why do you have a house full of old dictionaries?
What are they good for?
What do you plan to do with them?

These questions have been asked me so frequently that it seems wise to attempt an answer at once, lest the reader (like my friends and family) doubt my sanity. Collecting old dictionaries was not the result of logical appraisal but an emotional course of action brought about by a strong, inner urge which I never bothered to analyze. I have always been interested in books because I grew up in a family, although of modest means, that had a fairly scholarly library. And at an early age word meanings and dictionaries fascinated me.

This experience is neither abnormal nor rare. Nor is it sufficient to drive a person toward the unusual desire to acquire thousands of old dictionaries. Other factors were at work to produce a dictionary bibliomaniac. Perhaps in the hidden recesses of my mind was the belief that physical acquisition of a book is tantamount to the mental acquisition of its contents. Perhaps collecting dictionaries replaced a thwarted childhood ambition to become a language scholar. Perhaps I got considerable satisfaction out of improving my scholastic "pecking order" by having more reference books than others.

Whatever the early motives may have been, logical reasons for my collecting came only after I had achieved a substantial collection of old dictionaries. I found that I had to frame more socially acceptable reasons for filling my home with old dictionaries -- such as language research, tracing the history of word meanings, studying the development of the English language, or compiling in a modern computer words and meanings from major historical dictionaries for sophisticated analysis of English language development.

The private collecting of old English dictionaries is unusual because it differs so much in scope from collecting the works of a single author. This difference is even greater when the term "old English dictionaries" is interpreted broadly to include all kinds of dictionaries, all different editions, early multi-lingual dictionaries including English, and the early Latin and Greek dictionaries that contributed to the development of the English language. No bibliophile is likely to start out on such an ambitious scale. Collecting over such a wide scope is more likely to occur gradually as the search for specific books uncovers those in related fields. Unless a definite category or area of

collection can be described, the collection area will continue to fan out as the collector's appetite grows and book dealers offer associated items of interest. The collector must exhibit considerable discipline to keep his collection instincts within appropriate bounds.

In 1961 my acquisition of old dictionaries got under way with the purchase of quite a few from Inman, Fleming, Brentano's, and Scribner's in New York, and Lowdermilk's in Washington. Among these first acquisitions were such items as William Thomas' 1550 Grammar with an Italian dictionary, Florio's 1598 Italian-English dictionary and Webster's 1806 and 1828 first editions. At this early stage, I collected dictionaries with great joy without troubling myself as to my goals or purpose. Nor did I have very much information regarding the field in which I was searching. It took some time before I could locate sources that could supply definitive information as to the names of different lexicographers and the editions I should seek.

For some reason Worcester's dictionaries eluded me for several years. Perhaps it was just as well, because I was already enthralled with dictionary collecting when my first acquisition of a Worcester dictionary brought about a crucial reappraisal of my goals. This quarto edition of Worcester contained "A Catalogue of English Dictionaries" -- a seven-page list of 398 lexicographical works by nearly that number of lexicographers. This list did not include the many different editions of each work. And I could see that it was incomplete in many ways. Yet it was the most comprehensive list in compact form I have ever found showing the wide scope and types of English dictionaries. As I studied Worcester's catalogue I realized I had before me a map describing the unknown continent I had chosen to explore. For the first time, I had a grasp of how many English lexicographers there had been, the many kinds of dictionaries, and the magnitude of work involved, particularly if I held to my desire to acquire all editions instead of just first editions. I was tempted to restrict myself to just one of Worcester's dictionary categories. I spent several weeks in doubt, as my pragmatic logic wrestled with my bibliomaniacal psyche. Several years of collecting old dictionaries had allowed the collector's virus to become too well-entrenched to succumb to mere reason. I finally decided to go all out in all areas and (upon each acquisition) to plant my flag on Worcester's map of English lexicography. At times, emotional decisions are better than logical ones because they have more courage.

The encouragement resulting from marking acquisition progress on the Worcester list provided vital stimulation of adrenalin for zesty effort and relaxants for purse strings. Later, I found other lists for gauging progress from such sources as Starnes and Noyes's English Dictionaries from Cawdrey to Johnson, Starnes' Renaissance Dictionaries, and Alston's bibliography of regular English dictionaries. Later on, Hayashi's list of English dictionary first editions was helpful, although by that time my own sources were nearly as complete and in some cases permitted me to offer him corrections.

But the Worcester list and those acquired later also made me fully aware of the optimism required to undertake the ambitious program of securing so many old dictionaries. Other individuals could be overlooked for embarking on an overambitious quest, but a person with my professional background would be expected to know the magnitude of such an undertaking. My position for three decades has been that of Chief Statistical Officer for an international marketing research firm, requiring knowledge of research operations, their magnitude, cost, and probability of failure. Yet, the goal of acquiring so many dictionaries meant I was setting forth to find books published during the past 500 years -- knowing full well the small chance for these kinds of books surviving rough use, intentional destruction, fire, flood or war as they passed from owner to owner over centuries of time. In fact it should be evident that I undertook the challenge knowing it might be impossible.

Plans for carrying out this illogical quest were more rational. I recognized that carrying out this program would require bookshelf space, money, organized research and record keeping, effective use of time and travel, along with energy and dedication. Shelves were built in the basement of my home providing satisfactory space for all the dictionaries I was planning to secure. Books on shelves are better than books in boxes, and a collector who cannot display his books with order and style misses some of the pleasure of collecting.

While we pretend that money is a crass commodity unworthy of emphasis, it is a critical requirement for a successful book collection. The prices for old dictionaries escalated rapidly during the period in which I was collecting. While many factors contributed to this rise, I have had people tell me that my push for old dictionaries contributed to their rapid increase in price, and it is possible that my search for and purchase of nearly 3,000 dictionaries may have been a factor. There were many occasions when the price of a dictionary I wanted shocked me. I had to train myself to accept the high prices which these rare books commanded and be willing to part with the amounts required to collect vigorously. On quite a few occasions I have backed off from the purchase of items I would have very much liked to have acquired. When I first began to collect dictionaries, Mr. Fleming offered me a beautiful uncut first edition of Samuel Johnson's 1755 folio for \$1,400. I turned it down because at that point I hadn't learned to pay that much. And just this year, while I was spending a week in London searching for old dictionaries, Quaritch offered me an 8th century manuscript grammar for 8,000 pounds. Not only did I not buy it, I was even nervous about examining it.

While old dictionaries are not so freely available that you can make out a shopping list and just go out and buy them, you do need to know the items you are seeking and some idea as to how much you are willing to pay for them. I have learned from disappointments that when I backed away from some rare items because of cost, they were usually gone when I changed my mind and tried to get them. The length of time many old dictionaries remain at an antiquarian bookshop is only one or two weeks. And some of my great disappointments came from cabling

for items in catalogues and learning that they were already sold. So I found myself frustrated when I tried to acquire dictionaries the easy way -- ordering them from catalogues sent to me by book dealers.

My work always involved a great deal of travel and it was fortunate for my book collection interests that I frequently visited Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Cincinnati, Dallas, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Toronto. As my company extended its operation throughout the world, I began to travel abroad enough to contact rare book dealers in London, Dublin, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Vienna, and Tokyo. Over the years, I was able to visit many of the antiquarian bookshops in these cities and get acquainted with their owners and staffs. Gradually, I was able to get many of these bookmen to think of my name when they acquired old dictionaries, and either hold them aside for my next visit or hold them until I replied to their quotations.

To merit this type of cooperation I made it a point to respond promptly and to buy as many of the items offered as possible. I frequently purchased duplicates rather than discourage the book dealer who was thoughtful enough to hold the items for me and give me first opportunity to purchase them. When the number of duplicates offered became too frequent because of the size of my holdings, I endeavored to help the book dealer by providing him with a list of items I was seeking or of the more common items I already had in sufficient quantity.

In the field of marketing, a person is taught to view the marketplace from other viewpoints than his own. The antiquarian book dealer must make effective use of his time and soon learns to discontinue fruitless efforts. He is quite willing to go to the bother of holding items and quoting them to a prospective purchaser as long as the results justify his extra efforts. I never asked book dealers for a discount; I replied promptly to offers and paid for the books promptly on receipt or even in advance of receipt if they requested this arrangement. I found that I could get preferential consideration from many antiquarian book dealers because I was sympathetic to and cooperative with their problems.

Here I should emphasize that nearly every one of the hundreds of book dealers who have sold me books over the past two decades have been reputable and reliable. In fact, I found many antiquarian book dealers to be scholars and persons that I have been happy to consider close friends. Without their friendly help and cooperation my efforts would have been futile. Fortunately for me, there have been so many who have given me great help that it would be unfair to mention any without listing all of them. But without the extraordinary help I got from many of these book dealers, my efforts would have been unsuccessful. I am extremely grateful, not only for their help, but also for their giving me the time to know them and share our mutual interests, not just in scholarly works but in world developments and our philosophies on life.

Book collecting involves strong emotional feelings and psycholo-

gists would be quick to point out that book collectors' enjoyments come from the most basic of human satisfactions -- desire, challenge, anticipation, search, discovery, purchase, receiving, possession, accumulation, and pride. Collecting is possibly the only hobby that permits an adult the pleasure of anticipating and opening Christmas packages all during the year. But regardless of how honestly we view this activity, the enjoyment and thrill are real. Among the continuous satisfactions that came from building a successful collection are high points that stand out vividly. One of my greatest pleasures was securing Randle Cotgrave's personal, autographed copy of Hollyband's 1594 French-English dictionary. Cotgrave was revising Hollyband's dictionary before he decided the amount of work and changes justified his putting it out under his own name in 1611. Until the Britism Museum sent a certified copy of Cotgrave's signature, I did not dare believe that I had been able to acquire his personal copy. Another high point for me was finding P. M. Roget's personal, autographed copy of the first edition of his *Thesaurus*, published in 1852. It was filled with notations and corrections which showed up in later editions.

Upon noting that Webster's 1831 eighth edition was never located by those working on Skeel's bibliography of Webster, I was delighted when I checked my Webster acquisitions and found that I had acquired this rare edition.

While I was successful in getting nearly every English dictionary published under Nathan Bailey's name, ten years went by and I was still searching for a copy of his 1721 first edition. It seemed strange that I was finding so many of his other editions, but never the 1721 one. Finally, I managed to purchase the 1721 Bailey from Rev. Arthur Mangold of Liverpool, England, along with Rev. Mangold's master's thesis on Nathan Bailey at the University of Bristol. Within six months I had acquired two more and not long after turned down two others!

Collecting old dictionaries is filled with the excitement of finding many old items you never expected and the disappointments of searching in vain for other key items. But you tend to have enough good fortune to keep you optimistic. While the success or failure of acquiring individual dictionary editions is a part of the challenge and pleasure, it is the sum total of your efforts that determines the level of your satisfaction and viewpoint as to how well you have progressed toward your goal. Seeing my Alston (Vol. V: *The English Dictionary, 1604-1800*) acquisitions exceed 200 was a high point because this is greater than the number held by Oxford University and the British Museum, who rank one and two in Alston's list. While I am unable to determine holdings of other collectors or institutions across the broad field of English language dictionaries covered in Worcester's list, seeing my Worcester list filled with flags spread over all the categories had to be my greatest thrill of all.

It is now time to answer the third question posed at the beginning of this article. My decision to give the dictionaries to a library came

abruptly from a traumatic experience. The books were kept on bookshelves from floor to ceiling in my basement. In 1967, a flash flood from a cloudburst began pouring into our basement at a frightening rate. The storm had cut off the electricity and in the dark we rescued what books we could from the lower shelves. I lost some 200 books of which only 40 were dictionaries. This experience made me realize that I had a social responsibility as custodian of these old scholarly works. When I thought they were all going to be destroyed in the flood, I felt guilty of depriving future scholars of their heritage to these rare books. I began looking for a safer home for the collection the following week, hopefully at a university library where they would have a chance to serve a useful scholarly purpose.

I turned to my alma mater, Indiana State University in Terre Haute. There I learned from Fred Hanes, then Director of Libraries, that Indiana State University was planning a new library and that they would not only provide the assurances I wished, but would put them into the rare book section, one room of which would be called the Cordell Room. Since this new library would be constructed only a few miles from my birthplace, a flat over my father's grocery store, this offer seemed to provide a poetic ending. The dictionaries would end up in the town where my bibliomania was initially contracted and at the same university which had shaped not only my education, but also that of my family.

The arrangements at the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University exceeded my greatest expectations and were handled with an efficacy seldom encountered. The good fortune continued when it became possible to secure a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities which matched the value of the first gift of 453 dictionaries with a sum that permitted significant additional acquisitions, repairs, cataloguing and use of the collection. This, along with the university's own program for gradual improvement through a regular annual acquisition fund, meant that the collection would remain alive and keep its position among the world's best collections of dictionaries. My gratitude toward all those who made my dream come true is greater than I can express. And my family and friends no longer question my sanity -- in fact, they give me credit for more foresight than I deserve.

Editor's Note: With the permission of the author, this article has been adapted from the Foreword to "A Short-Title Catalogue of the Warren N. and Suzanne B. Cordell Collection of Dictionaries" published by Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University in 1975. The catalogue will be reissued in 1979 in two volumes, one volume for English dictionaries and one for dictionaries involving a foreign language. Now numbering some 7,000 dictionaries, the range and depth of the Cordell collection easily supports the contention that it is the most comprehensive collection of dictionaries related to the English language that is housed under one roof.